



# From Policy to Practice:

## Advancing Open Data Governance in Malawi

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**Date:** November 2025

# Executive Summary

Malawi has made clear commitments to transparency and digital transformation, but its progress on open data governance remains uneven and largely symbolic. The country has the foundational laws/policies and the ambition, from the Access to Information Act to the Digital Transformation Strategy and Malawi 2063 Vision, yet the practical systems that make data genuinely open, usable, and valuable are still missing.

The core issue is a persistent gap between policy intent and implementation. Data remains scattered across ministries in incompatible formats. There is no central authority to enforce open standards or ensure regular publication of government data. Most government datasets remain trapped in PDF reports or locked behind institutional silos, making them difficult to reuse for public accountability or innovation. Weak coordination, limited funding, and low data literacy have turned open data from a national goal into a set of disconnected initiatives.

This problem persists for three main reasons. First, open data has not been treated as a governance priority requiring political oversight; it is still viewed as a technical project. Second, public institutions lack both the incentives and capacity to share data consistently. Third, citizens, civil society, and innovators have not been adequately engaged or empowered to use public data, weakening demand for openness.

Without accessible and trustworthy data, public oversight falters, corruption risks rise, and policy decisions are made in the dark. Fragmented data systems slow service delivery in sectors such as health, education, and agriculture, while missed opportunities for innovation hold back the digital economy. Ultimately, low transparency undermines citizen trust in government, a trust already strained by perceptions of opacity and limited accountability.



**Yet the opportunity is clear and attainable. Malawi can close this gap by:**

**1**

Establishing a National Open Data Coordination Unit under the Office of the President and Cabinet to enforce standards and monitor compliance.

**2**

Fully operationalising the Data Protection Authority to balance openness with privacy and legal safeguards.

**3**

Investing in infrastructure and data literacy, including a unified open data portal and targeted training for civil servants and civic-tech developers.

With political leadership and a focus on a few high-value datasets such as procurement, budgets, and company registers, Malawi can transform its open data vision into a working system that delivers real public value. The next phase is not about writing new policies but about making existing ones work, turning data from a static asset into a driver of trust, innovation, and inclusive growth.

## 1. Research Context

Open data has become an essential element of modern governance. When governments publish data that is complete, timely, and reusable, they build transparency, enable innovation, and strengthen the social contract with citizens. Globally, the OECD OURdata Index highlights notable advances in data availability and accessibility but emphasises the continued need for robust governance structures and user-centric publication mechanisms.<sup>[1]</sup> Similarly, findings from the Global Data Barometer reveal that while many countries have adopted open data policies, practical implementation remains inconsistent, with limited publication of high-value datasets and insufficient quality assurance frameworks.<sup>[2]</sup>

The African Union Data Policy Framework encourages interoperable and safe data ecosystems at the regional level based on human rights and digital inclusion.<sup>[3]</sup> Complementing this, the Open Government Partnership (OGP), made up of over 75 national and 150 local governments from across the globe (including Malawi), guides and monitors the application of open data principles that emphasise accountability and civic participation.<sup>[4]</sup>

This paper draws on qualitative policy analysis and content review of Malawi's key national strategies, legislation, and policy documents to examine gaps and propose pathways for strengthening open data governance.

[1] OECD. (2023). Open, Useful and Re-usable data (OURdata) Index 2023: Main Findings. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

[2] Global Data Barometer. (2023). Global Data Barometer: Key Findings Report. Global Data Barometer Secretariat

[3] African Union. (2022). African Union Data Policy Framework. African Union Commission.

[4] Open Government Partnership. (2023). Global Report on Open Government Partnership Commitments. Open Government Partnership Secretariat.

## 2. Policy Gaps and Structural Weaknesses

### 2.1 Weak Policy Integration and Enforcement

Malawi's open data vision is embedded in numerous policies: the National ICT Policy (2013), Digital Transformation Strategy, Access to Information Act, and Statistics Act, among others. However, these instruments operate in silos, lacking clear operational mechanisms, enforcement power, and accountability measures.

Although the Digital Transformation Strategy identifies open government data as a strategic enabler for innovation, no centralised open data portal or standardised framework currently exists. Data systems remain fragmented across institutions such as the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA), the National Statistical Office (NSO) and the Department of e-Government, each using differing standards and formats.

Legal frameworks focus primarily on access to information and data protection but fail to mandate proactive publication or interoperability. For example, the Access to Information Act (2016) allows citizens to request data but does not compel institutions to proactively publish reusable datasets. As a result, most government data remain trapped in static reports and non-standardised Excel files.



### 2.2 Implementation Gaps and Institutional Fragmentation

Institutional silos, weak coordination, and inadequate funding have resulted in poor implementation of open data commitments. Systems operated by ministries and agencies are rarely interoperable, as confirmed by the UNDP Malawi Digital Readiness

Assessment, which highlighted limited data exchange in sectors such as education, health, and agriculture. For example, while the National Statistical Office, e-Government Department, and Public Procurement and Disposal of Assets Authority each manage separate

datasets, there is no central mechanism for data integration or standardised publication, leading to gaps in accessibility and usability. These weaknesses have created a landscape of fragmented, non-standardised, and inaccessible government data, especially for high-value datasets such as procurement contracts, budgets, land records, and sectoral performance indicators.

## 2.3 Governance and Oversight Deficits

Open data has not been institutionalised as a governance priority. There is no central authority empowered to enforce compliance or monitor data publication. Weak oversight and accountability structures mean that policy directives rarely translate into operational outcomes. Consequently, Malawi's open data ecosystem remains a collection of disconnected initiatives rather than a coherent system supporting transparency and innovation.

Open data governance in Malawi depends on collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including government ministries, regulators, development partners, civil society, academia, and the private sector. However, coordination among these actors remains weak, resulting in duplication of initiatives and inconsistent standards.

**Table 1: Stakeholders Supporting Open Data Governance in Malawi**

| Stakeholder Group                              | Entities                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Primary Contributions / Data Governance Focus                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Government Ministries &amp; Authorities</b> | Ministry of Information & Digitalisation (Department of e-Government); Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA); National Statistical Office (NSO); Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs; Reserve Bank of Malawi (RBM); Public Procurement and Disposal of Assets Authority (PPDA); Public Private Partnership Commission (PPPC); and the Digital Malawi Project (under the Ministry of Information). | Oversight of digital government platforms, open contracting and fiscal transparency reforms, data protection enforcement, national statistics coordination, financial and telecom regulation, interoperability, and digital infrastructure deployment across government institutions. |
| <b>Development Partners</b>                    | World Bank, UNCDF, UNDP                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Funding digital projects, inclusive digital economy scorecards, institutional capacity building                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Civic Engagement and Advocacy</b>           | The Open Government Partnership (OGP), NICE Public Trust, Civil Society Organizations (Digital Rights Coalition, CHRR, among others)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Open data advocacy, digital rights, civic awareness, public participation                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Private Sector &amp; Academia</b>           | Information and Communication Technology Association of Malawi (ICTAM); Malawi Internet Service Providers Association (MISPA); mHub Innovation Centre; Mobile Network Operators (e.g., Airtel Malawi, TNM); and Universities & Research Institutions.                                                                                                                                                               | Contribute to digital innovation, broadband and internet service provision, data hosting, ICT skills development, research on emerging technologies, and private-sector participation in open data ecosystems.                                                                        |

*Source: Author's construction*

## 2.4 Low Citizen Trust and Participation

Despite the existence of access to information frameworks, citizen participation remains limited due to poor dissemination, low awareness, and minimal digital literacy. Studies have shown weak public engagement in policymaking, compounded by inconsistent publication of datasets. For example, a study found poor citizen participation to influence public accountability in local policymaking in Malawi<sup>[5]</sup>. Many government institutions still operate in isolation, with incomplete datasets that are inconsistently updated or not publicly available in usable formats. This lack of open and timely information reduces opportunities for citizens to scrutinise public decisions or engage in participatory governance processes.<sup>[6]</sup>

Moreover, the absence of standardised open data mechanisms and limited civic digital literacy further constrains citizens' ability to interact with government data or use it for advocacy, innovation, and accountability. As a result, trust in public institutions remains low, reflecting broader concerns about opacity and limited responsiveness in governance. Without accessible and timely information, citizens are unable to scrutinise decisions or participate meaningfully in governance, further eroding institutional trust.

## 3. Comparative Performance and Benchmarks

Malawi's score of 38 out of 100 in the 2024 Open Data Inventory (ODIN), ranking 162nd globally, illustrates slow progress relative to regional peers such as Morocco (77), Kenya (64), and South Africa (70). ODIN data indicate that while Malawi performs moderately on data coverage, its openness remains low. In essence, data are being collected but not shared in usable, machine-readable formats, limiting transparency, evidence-based policy, and innovation.

These scores indicate that significant gaps exist in terms of completeness, standardisation, and usability. This limited performance constrains evidence-based policymaking and reduces the country's capacity to monitor development outcomes effectively, undermining transparency, accountability, and informed public participation in governance. The findings highlight areas where improvements in data transparency, interoperability, and public dissemination could strengthen accountability and citizen trust.

[5] Kasoka, E. (2023). Malawi Access to Information Act: Tool to Control Corruption? International Anti-Corruption Academy.

[6] Transparency International. (2023). Corruption Perceptions Index 2023: Sub-Saharan Africa Analysis. Berlin: Transparency International.



## 4. Policy and Institutional Analysis

The effectiveness of Malawi's open data governance depends on how well its policy instruments align and translate into measurable outcomes. The following table compares key frameworks, highlighting objectives, provisions, implementation status, and gaps.

**Table 2: Policies, Strategies and Legal Framework Review**

| Policy / Legal Instrument                                           | Key Provisions for Open Data                                                                                                     | Gaps / Weaknesses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Constitution of the Republic of Malawi (1994)</b> <sup>[7]</sup> | Section 37 guarantees citizens' right to access information held by the State and provides constitutional basis for transparency | Limited enforcement mechanisms and reliance on secondary legislation reduce practical application of rights; weak digital integration of Access to Information enforcement constrains access in remote areas. There is a need to strengthen awareness campaigns and integrate digital access mechanisms. |
| <b>Digital Transformation Strategy (2021–2026)</b> <sup>[8]</sup>   | E-services platforms, interoperability frameworks, citizen dashboards                                                            | Weak institutional capacity, poor data culture, and funding shortfalls hinder interoperability and coordination. Limited adoption across ministries reduces visibility and public trust. There is a need to strengthen cross-ministry integration and empower local data units.                          |
| <b>National ICT Policy (2013)</b> <sup>[9]</sup>                    | E-Government promotion, data management frameworks, capacity building                                                            | Outdated framework lacking open data mandate and enforcement; fragmented systems limit interoperability. An update to reflect emerging technologies, open data principles, and measurable implementation targets is urgent.                                                                              |
| <b>NAccess to Information Act (2016)</b> <sup>[10]</sup>            | Mandates proactive disclosure, requests for information, and institutional oversight mechanisms                                  | Reactive disclosure model, weak coordination among information officers, and limited rural enforcement reduce inclusivity and citizen trust. It is imperative to strengthen proactive publication, institutional monitoring, and nationwide awareness campaigns.                                         |

[7] [Constitution of the Republic of Malawi 1994](#)

[8] [Malawi-Digital-Economy-Strategy-2021-2026](#)

[9] [National ICT Policy \(2013\)](#)

[10] [Access to Information Act \(2016\)](#)

|                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Data protection act (2024)</b> <sup>[11]</sup>                           | Establishes a Data Protection Authority, regulates processing of personal data, and harmonises privacy principles with open-data needs                          | Institutional capacity constraints, unclear operational guidelines, and inadequate budgetary allocation have delayed the establishment and functionality of the Authority. Low public and institutional awareness of data privacy obligations further weakens enforcement, while the absence of an interoperability framework between privacy safeguards and open-data systems creates uncertainty in balancing data protection with transparency objectives.                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Public Finance Management Act (2017)</b> <sup>[12]</sup>                 | Mandates publication of budgets, expenditure reports, and audit results                                                                                         | budgets, expenditure reports, and audit results, and poor interoperability hinder fiscal data use and citizen oversight. Reform required: improve real-time access via open budget portals and ensure coordination with oversight institutions.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Public Procurement and Disposal of Assets Act (2017)</b> <sup>[13]</sup> | Mandates publication of procurement plans, tenders, and contract awards                                                                                         | Inconsistent publication and lack of machine-readable datasets reduce usability and public monitoring. Reform is required: standardise procurement data formats and integrate with an open contracting portal.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Statistics Act (2013)</b> <sup>[14]</sup>                                | Mandates NSO to collect and publish statistics; promotes data access for planning                                                                               | Limited interoperability between NSO and sectoral databases; weak machine-readable publication reduces accessibility. Modernise NSO infrastructure and promote inter-ministerial data sharing.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>E-Government / e-Citizen Portals</b> <sup>[15]</sup>                     | Online tax filing, permits, licensing, and payment services                                                                                                     | Non-interoperable portals lacking API frameworks limit data exchange and open data linkages. Reform required: integrate systems under a unified data-sharing and standards framework.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Sectoral Dashboards (Health, Education, etc.)</b> <sup>[16]</sup>        | Provide ministry-specific dashboards and datasets                                                                                                               | Non-standardised dashboards limit cross-sectoral data sharing and coordination. Reform required: develop unified standards and link sectoral data to a central open data platform.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Copyright Act (2016)</b> <sup>[17]</sup>                                 | Defines ownership, reproduction, and publication of original data and content                                                                                   | Absence of open data licensing restricts reuse of government data. Introduce Creative Commons-based licensing for non-sensitive public data to encourage innovation.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Malawi 2063 (Vision Document, 2021–2063)</b> <sup>[18]</sup>             | Recognizes digitalisation and ICT as key enablers of productivity, transparency, and citizen empowerment; promotes data-driven decision-making and e-governance | Lacks a dedicated open data implementation framework and has limited monitoring indicators on data access, publication, and citizen engagement. Coordination primarily through the National Planning Commission (NPC) and the Ministry of Information; weak cross-sectoral data linkages. Strong alignment with Agenda 2063 (African Union) and UN SDGs emphasising innovation and governance. Develop an Open Data Implementation Framework under MIP-2; establish measurable indicators for citizen engagement and strengthen coordination between NPC and the ICT Ministry. |

[11] [Data protection act \(2024\)](#).

[12] [Public Finance Management Act \(2017\)](#).

[13] [Public Procurement and Disposal of Assets Act \(2017\)](#).

[14] [Statistics Act \(2013\)](#).

[15] [E-Government / e-Citizen Portals](#).

[16] [Sectoral Dashboards](#).

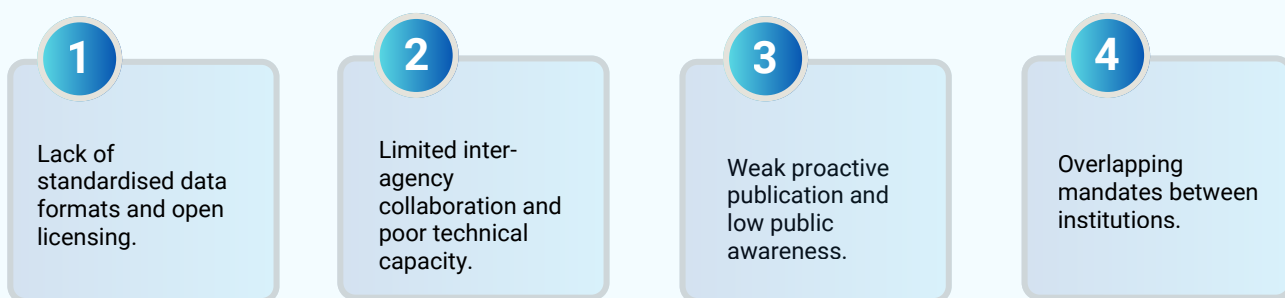
[17] [Copyright Act \(2016\)](#).

[18] [Malawi 2063](#).

|                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Companies Act (2013) &amp; Beneficial Ownership Regulations (2022)</b> <sup>[19]</sup>                | Require disclosure of beneficial owners; integration of the Malawi Business Registration System (MBRS) with PPDA and MRA systems.                                                                                                                                   | Absence of mandatory re-registration and penalties for non-compliance; fragmented registry systems and limited inter-agency coordination.           |
| <b>Malawi National Action Plan (NAP) for the Open Government Partnership (2025–2028)</b> <sup>[20]</sup> | Prioritises open data in five policy areas: Anti-Corruption, Fiscal Openness, Digital Governance, Natural Resources, and Climate & Environment; includes commitments on Beneficial Ownership, Open Contracting, Political Party Funding, and Access to Public Data. | Implementation relies on inter-agency coordination and adequate funding; awareness of OGP commitments remains low among MDAs and local governments. |

**Source:** Author's elaboration of referenced legislative and strategy documents in the public domain

## Key weaknesses emerging from the analysis include:



These gaps underscore the need for a harmonised, enforceable, and citizen-centred open data framework.

## 5. Lessons from other African countries

Comparative research indicates that countries that have adopted comprehensive open data frameworks, such as South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana have experienced measurable improvements in citizen participation, trust in government, and service delivery innovation <sup>[21]</sup>

[19] [Ownership Regulations \(2022\)](#).

[20] [Malawi National Action Plan \(NAP\) for the Open Government Partnership \(2025–2028\)](#).

[21] [World Wide Web Foundation. \(2022\). Open Data Barometer](#).



## South Africa

- South Africa's Government Data Portal offers valuable lessons on prioritising quality over quantity. By focusing on a smaller set of high-quality datasets with detailed metadata and user-friendly documentation, South Africa improved usability and citizen trust. Regular independent audits further enhanced data credibility, showing that effective open data governance depends on the quality and clarity of datasets rather than volume alone.<sup>[22]</sup>
- South Africa's Vulekamali Budget Portal showcases the value of citizen-orientated fiscal transparency. By simplifying complex budget data into plain-language summaries and visual dashboards, the initiative improved public understanding and civic participation in budget processes. The Vulekamali Budget Portal effectively exemplifies the accessibility and significance of fiscal data for a wide range of audiences.
- South Africa's GovChat Platform demonstrates how technology can bridge accessibility gaps in open government. By enabling communication with public services via SMS and WhatsApp, the platform expanded inclusion for low-income and rural communities. This illustrates the potential for mobile-first solutions to improve responsiveness and accountability in government interactions.

## Kenya

- Kenya's Open Data Initiative (2011) demonstrates how high-level political leadership and a central coordinating body ensure consistent data publication and interoperability. The presidential launch of the initiative ensured visibility and legitimacy, while the Kenya ICT Authority served as a central coordination hub for standardisation across ministries. This strong political and institutional backing established open data as a core component of digital governance.<sup>[23]</sup>

<sup>[22]</sup>Open Data South Africa Toolkit. [GitBook](#)

<sup>[23]</sup> Disseminating the power of information: The Kenya Open Data Initiative, 2011–2012. *Innovations for Successful Societies*, Princeton University.

- Kenya's Open Data Ambassadors Programme reflects the impact of grassroots data literacy and public engagement. Training local ambassadors in storytelling and data use helped communities translate open data into practical applications, enhancing local innovation and citizen empowerment.<sup>[24]</sup>

## Zambia

- Zambia's Public Procurement Portal highlights the transformative role of digital tools in promoting procurement transparency. Through mandatory e-procurement and publication of contract information in real-time aligned with Open Contracting Data Standards (OCDS), Zambia strengthened accountability and reduced inefficiencies. This demonstrates that transparency in procurement can drive better public spending outcomes when supported by standardised data frameworks.<sup>[25]</sup>

## Ghana

- Ghana's Public Procurement Authority Portal emphasises the importance of phased implementation and institutional capacity-building. The staged rollout across national, regional, and district levels, combined with pre-launch training for officials, enhanced system adoption and sustainability. Providing API access to civil society also reinforced openness and encouraged evidence-based public oversight.<sup>[26]</sup>

***These cases highlight that open data reforms succeed when supported by political will, institutional coordination, and citizen-orientated design.***

# 6. Policy recommendations

To strengthen transparency, accountability, and citizen participation through data-driven governance, the following actions are critical:

## 1. Strengthen Open Data Coordination

The Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC) should take the lead in establishing an Inter-Ministerial Open Data Coordination Unit, modelled after Kenya's ICT Authority.

[24] [The Case of the Kenyan and City of Cape Town Open Data Initiatives](#)

[25] [Open Contracting Partnership. \(2021\). Open contracting in Zambia: From data to impact. London: OCP](#)

[26] [Africa Data Revolution Report 2018: Status and emerging impact of open data in Africa](#)

This unit would be responsible for enforcing data standards, overseeing dataset publication, and ensuring interoperability across government systems. The Ministry of Information and Digitalisation, through the Department of e-Government, and the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) should provide technical support, while the National Statistical Office (NSO) ensures data harmonisation. Quarterly reporting to Cabinet will enhance transparency and institutional accountability, ensuring that open data initiatives are monitored and sustained at the highest political level.

## **2. Operationalise Data Protection and Enforcement Mechanisms**

Fully implement the Data Protection Act (2024) to balance openness and privacy. Build the capacity of the Data Protection Authority and conduct nationwide awareness campaigns on data rights and responsible use. To strengthen enforcement, Malawi should implement nationwide awareness campaigns on data rights and privacy, targeting both citizens and civil servants. This ensures that citizens understand how to access, use, and protect their data responsibly. This should be led by the Ministry of Information and Digitalisation and MACRA. In parallel, Malawi could adopt Ghana's model of training procurement and data officers prior to launching new digital systems, ensuring readiness before policy rollouts<sup>[27]</sup>. Such preparatory measures will enhance compliance and institutional capacity, ultimately building citizen trust in digital governance systems.

## **3. Build Technical Capacity and Standardised Infrastructure**

The Ministry of Information and Digitalisation, in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs, the Public Procurement and Disposal of Assets Authority (PPDA), and the Public Private Partnership Commission (PPPC), should spearhead the development of a unified open data ecosystem. This system should integrate e-procurement, fiscal dashboards, and sectoral data portals through standardised open APIs and metadata frameworks, drawing inspiration from Zambia's and South Africa's models. The Digital Malawi Project can serve as the technical anchor for infrastructure deployment and system interoperability. Malawi should also launch a national e-procurement platform publishing all tenders above MWK 50 million, linked to a centralised Open Data Portal. In addition, a National Fiscal Transparency Portal should be established to publish monthly budget execution data, auditor reports, and simplified citizen budgets in both English and Chichewa. These initiatives will expand public access to information and strengthen fiscal accountability.

[27] [World Bank. \(2020\). Ghana Electronic Procurement System \(GHANEPS\).](#)



## 7. Implementation Considerations

Effective implementation of open data governance in Malawi requires a coordinated, multi-phase approach, as shown in Figure 1 and discussed below, beginning with Year 1 – National Core (3 pilot sites) and followed by Years 2–6 – gradual urban expansion towards 100% national coverage:

1

Political Leadership and Institutional Commitment: Embed open data targets in ministerial performance contracts and secure high-level oversight.

2

Sustainable Resources and Funding: Adopt blended financing models, including PPPs and donor support.

3

Strengthening ICT Infrastructure: Invest in interoperable systems and open data portals.

4

Stakeholder Engagement and Capacity Building: Institutionalise a multi-stakeholder forum and build public data literacy.

**Figure 1. Implementation Plan**



Source: Author's construction

## 8. Conclusion

Moving from policy to practice will require political leadership, institutional coordination, and a citizen-centric approach. By transforming its open data system into a practical, enforceable framework, Malawi can rebuild public trust, stimulate innovation, and achieve the goals of Malawi 2063 through transparency and inclusive digital governance.

**Acknowledgements:** This paper was developed through the Africa's Data Future Fellowship, a CSEA initiative that builds expert capacity for evidence-based data policy in Africa. The Fellowship is part of CSEA's wider data governance programme, supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The author gratefully acknowledges the project team's guidance and collaboration.

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed here are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the positions of CSEA, the Fellowship, or the Hewlett Foundation. This work contributes to policy dialogue on data governance and ethical digital transformation in Africa.